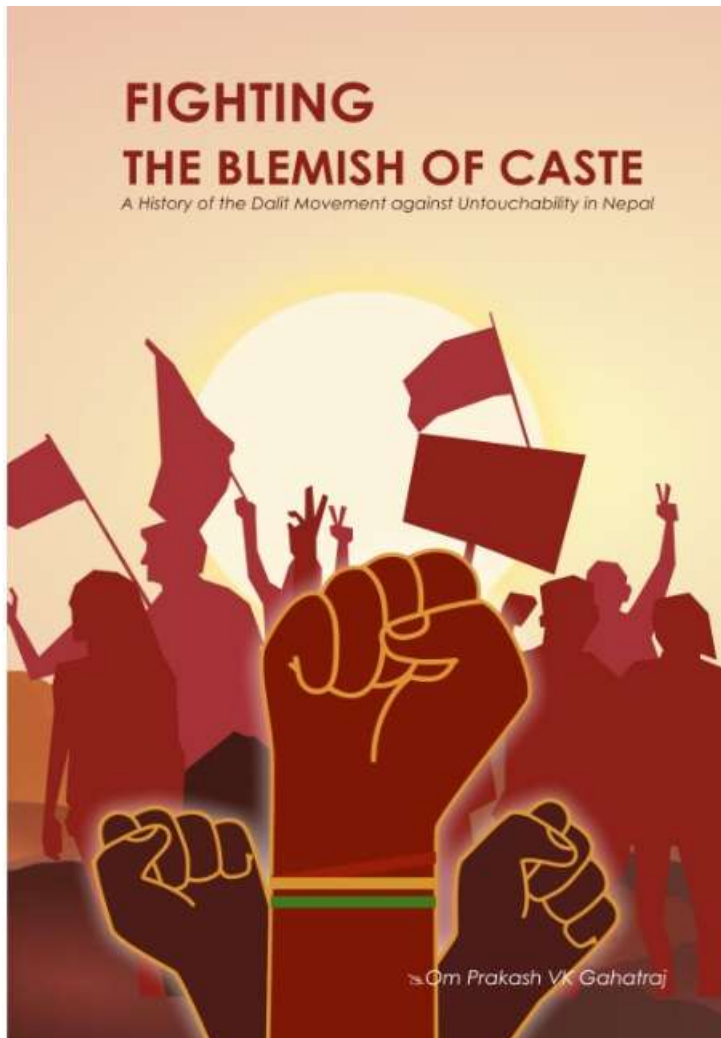




Fighting the Blemish of Caste

A History of the Dalit Movement against Untouchability in Nepal

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Foreword

It is with deep sense of respect and profound admiration that I write this Foreword for the book *Fighting the Blemish of Caste: A History of the Dalit Movement against Untouchability in Nepal* authored by Mr. Om Prakash VK Gahatraj. At the outset, I would like to mention that he is my dear maternal uncle, who was my guardian and mentor during my high school days in Kathmandu around early 1970s. Back then, I had the opportunity to watch him closely in his engagements and relentless work to support Dalit movement of Nepal at the national level that went on continuing for over five decades. Knowing him probably better than anyone else in this context, I can attest to the unwavering commitment and intellectual clarity that he brings to this endeavor as far as Dalit movement of Nepal is concerned. Since 1971, as a young high school student following the movement alongside him, I was closely observing his activism and scholarship evolving into a rare combination of networking with grassroots connections and visionary thinking to become, in his current standing as an extraordinary elder and knowledge keeper among members of Dalit community. His deep engagement with Dalit communities across the country, as well as his intellectual inquiry, has produced a work in the form of this book that is based both on ground realities and global relevance. The author's lived experience, combined with rigorous scholarship, makes this book a powerful testament to the resilience of Nepal's Dalits and their allies. He has not only documented untold historical accounts; he himself has made some of it.

This book is both a monumental historical archive and a passionate call to action. As mentioned above, I have been privileged to follow the author's tireless journey since 1971, observing his dedication to truth, justice, and equity through scholarly and activist pathways. This work has not only chronicled the Dalit movement in Nepal with rigorous

details and intellectual clarity, but also expanded the global imagination for social justice by drawing from historical parallels across nations particularly between Nepal and India, and beyond.

The book is organized into carefully thought-out chapters that each illuminate key elements of caste-based discrimination and efforts made historically to eradicate it. The author does not shy away from interrogating entrenched social norms, historical distortions, or religious misappropriations that have institutionalized inequality resulting in outrageous dehumanizing evil practices of caste-discrimination and untouchability in the society for millennia.

In brief, this book begins with a sweeping historical overview of Nepal's ethnic diversity, highlighting the tragic contradiction that despite the country being a rich mosaic of 142 ethnicities and 124 languages, the country has long perpetuated the evil of caste-based discrimination with unjust hierarchical divisions among them. It presents a comprehensive historical and analytical account of caste-based discrimination, its religious and social roots, and the struggles of Dalits to achieve dignity, justice, and equality in the country. It, in its initial chapters, traces the origins and necessity of the Dalit movement, examining Hindu mythology, the Varna system, and the institutionalization of untouchability, while detailing the prevailing situations of Hill and Terai Dalits, their entry into politics, landmark organizations such as the Nepal Rastriya Dalit Jana Vikash Parishad, and the impact of legal reforms like the 1963 Civil Code. It highlights numerous incidents of caste-based violence and exclusion across the country, and places Nepal's movement in conversation alongside international Dalit struggles, particularly in India. Further, it expands on global connections and solidarities, reflecting on lessons from revolutions, global forums, international collaborations, and diaspora engagements, while also examining national efforts including constitutional inclusion, legal measures, Dalit NGOs, and literary activism. The narrative culminates with contemporary challenges,

pioneering and key leaders and activists who mark the history of Dalit movement in Nepal, the role of Dalit media, historical organizations, and finally the Toronto Declaration's call for a caste-free world, offering both critical reflections and recommendations for the future of the Dalit movement in Nepal. Especially the historical account of struggles of pioneering Dalit leader Sarvajeet Vishwakarma following India's Dalit movement in the extraordinary leadership of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, underscoring the importance of the latter's visit to Nepal in 1956. A few major highlights from the book are summarized below.

Historical Roots of Caste Hierarchies

The author traces the injustice imposed through the corrupted evolution of the Hindu *Vamashram* system that initiated untouchability following the *Manusmriti*, revealing how originally an occupational classification was manipulated into a birth-based hierarchy. The author's explanation of how invaders to Sindhu Valley, later represented as Aryans, misappropriated its civilization, and how they transformed themselves from cattle herders to socio-political masters and rulers, is a compelling narrative that forces readers to question mythologies as historical accounts. His references to texts like the *Rigveda*, *Upanishads*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, balanced by examples from reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Mahatma Gandhi, show that Hinduism, at its philosophical best, promotes compassion, harmony, and equality, which are practiced in contrary in the contemporary world.

Through ancient Vedic texts, the author uncovers the theological distortions that have allowed religious doctrines to justify systemic oppression. The book does not simply critique; it offers nuanced interpretations, noting that original scriptural teachings emphasized dignity of labor and spiritual egalitarianism to the contrary of what contemporary society has been practicing for centuries. This critical exegesis is not only bold but necessary, as it calls for the reinterpretation of religious traditions to support human dignity and equality in the 21st century.

Pioneering Struggles and the Legacy of Bhagat Sarvajeet Vishwakarma

No history of the Dalit movement in Nepal can be complete without honoring the trailblazing courage of Bhagat Sarvajeet Vishwakarma and his fellow pioneers who dared to speak truth to powerful autocratic rulers at a time when caste-based oppression was not only normalized taboo but was brutally enforced. The book narrates how in the early 20th century, amidst the iron grip of the Rana regime and deep-rooted social orthodoxy, Bhagat Sarvajeet Vishwakarma emerged as a voice of moral defiance. He, along with his comrades, initiated what could be called the formal initiation of the Dalit movement in Nepal. Despite facing public shaming, legal restrictions, and physical risk, they raised foundational demands for dignity, access to temples, public water sources, education, and the right to live as equals. Their historic activism, though ignored, suppressed or erased in official histories, laid the ideological and emotional groundwork for subsequent generations of Dalit leaders. Bhagat's contributions were not limited to protest alone—his ideas envisioned an inclusive and equitable Nepal, challenging not only the cruelty of casteism but the silence of the larger society. His example continues to serve as an enduring symbol of sacrifice, resistance, and visionary leadership in the journey toward caste justice in Nepal.

Nepali Sociopolitical Context and the Need for a Dalit Movement

The book meticulously outlines how caste discrimination became ingrained in Nepalese society through state policies and cultural norms. From the Lichhavi and Malla periods to the unification campaigns of Prithvi Narayan Shah and the authoritarian rule of the Ranas, each political epoch reinforced unjust social stratification. The infamous Muluki Ain of 1854, promulgated by autocratic ruler Jung Bahadur Rana, codified caste-based hierarchical exclusion, creating a legal framework for marginalization and systemic oppression of Dalits by the state.

Dalits, despite being the community of hardworking artisans and cultural bedrock of the nation, were denied dignified access to drinking water, temples, education, and political representation. Even today, the author illustrates with chilling evidence how discrimination persists in schools, workplaces, and even in overseas diaspora communities. The call for a continued Dalit movement is not rhetorical; it is grounded in decades of lived experience, community trauma, and the continued failure of state institutions to provide social justice.

Comparative Inspirations: Learnings from Dr. Ambedkar's Teachings and His Movement in India

One of the most compelling dimensions of this book is its comparative perspective on caste discrimination in Nepal, examined through the lens of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar's teachings and his transformative struggles in India. The Dalit movement in Nepal, initiated by pioneers such as Sarvajeet Vishwakarma, was deeply inspired by Dr. Ambedkar's fight for justice and equality across the border. His intellectual legacy and strategies for social reform did not remain confined to India but reverberated into Nepal through the active exchange of ideas, cross-border visits of Dalit leaders, and the circulation of empowering Dalit literature. These transnational connections created a fertile ground for Nepali Dalit leaders to draw strength, vision, and strategic direction. A particularly significant moment was Dr. Ambedkar's own visit to Nepal to attend the World Buddhist Conference, which symbolically and politically reinforced India's solidarity with Nepali Dalit struggles. This convergence of experiences illustrates how the movement for Dalit emancipation in Nepal was not an isolated effort, but part of a larger South Asian wave of resistance and assertion shaped by Ambedkar's enduring influence.

Comparative Inspirations: Learnings from The Buraku and African American Struggles

One of the most inspirational aspects of this book is its comparative analysis of caste discrimination in Nepal with the Buraku issue in Japan and racial segregation in the

United States. The Buraku Liberation League (BLL) in Japan, inspired by the 1922 founding of the National Levelers Association (Suiheisha), offers powerful lessons for Nepal. The author's exploration of BLL leader Matsumoto Jiichiro's lifelong activism, legislative achievements, and international solidarity with South Asian Dalit leaders shows the potential of intersectional and transnational advocacy. The Japanese government's eventual adoption of structural interventions—from infrastructure investment to human rights education—demonstrates what political will can achieve for societal reform to the advantages of all.

Likewise, the author's portrayal of the American Civil Rights Movement through the lives of abolitionists like John Brown and leaders like Abraham Lincoln reminds us of the power of ethical conviction and civic courage. The educational legacy of Storer College and the ideological foundation of the Niagara Movement mirror the aspirations of Nepal's Dalit activists for social inclusion and equal opportunity.

A Human Rights Imperative

The book's call for caste-based discrimination to be recognized as a human rights violation, both within Nepal and internationally, is timely and urgent. It echoes the principles laid out in global frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD). The Toronto Declaration that emerged from the Global Conference for a Caste Free World 2025 testifies the need for call to action towards implementation of those principles.

Conclusion: A Call to Conscience and Collective Action

Fighting the Blemish of Caste is more than a book—it is a voice of Dalits in millions heralding a beacon of hope for action. It compels us to reflect, to question, and to act. It invites policy makers, educators, spiritual leaders, research scholars and youth to re-imagine a Nepal where no child is born into stigma, where no artisan is treated as subhuman, and where no community is left behind.

This book must be read, taught, and debated. It must find its way into classrooms, academic research institutions, legislative chambers, governmental policy making mechanisms and international forums. For in this text lies not only the story of Nepal's Dalits, but the universal struggle for human dignity. Let us embrace its lessons, amplify its voices, and together, fight the blemish of caste—everywhere it lurks.

Finally, I express my gratitude to the author for the opportunity given to me to edit the first draft of the book manuscript and especially, to have a firsthand in crosschecking the historical facts and their narratives to the best of my knowledge and through lived experiences as told and retold at our family networks.

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A History of the Dalit Movement against Untouchability in Nepal

For over three thousand years, caste-based discrimination has scarred South Asian societies, denying millions their basic human dignity. In Nepal, this legacy hardened into law and daily practice—separating people by birth, restricting access to resources, and enforcing untouchability.

In *Fighting the Blemish of Caste*, Om Prakash VK Gahatraj documents the long, unfinished struggle of Dalits against this injustice. From the bravery of early reformers like Bhagat Sarvajit Vishwakarma to the waves of social movements that paralleled democratic change, the book captures both the pain of exclusion and the resilience of resistance.

This is more than history—it is a reminder that equality and social justice remain urgent, unfinished tasks. Engaging, deeply researched, and uncompromising, the book challenges readers to confront prejudice and work toward a society where every human being is valued equally.

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